Welcome to the Executive Summary of the CIVICUS State of Civil Society Report 2014. This year’s edition brings our attention to the state of global governance. As always, the State of Civil Society Report is written by civil society, for civil society.

This report draws on contributions from more than 30 of the world’s leading experts on civil society as well as on inputs from our members, partners, supporters and others in the global CIVICUS alliance. This diverse group of contributors are thought leaders in their own right and eminent voices at the forefront of reimagining global governance and citizen action. The varied contributions highlight changing global political dynamics, an emerging disillusionment with global frameworks of governance and a fundamental lack of accountability within international decision-making.

The report also contains the findings of a pilot project, based on research conducted with more than 450 civil society organisations, which assesses how well intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) engage civil society.

We believe that the report represents a body of critical thinking on the changing state of contemporary civil society and global governance. We would like to thank everyone involved for their efforts and continuing support. CIVICUS wishes to express our gratitude to the following contributors, donors, editors, staff members and designers.
In 2013, I flew tens of thousands of miles. Most of these trips were to represent CIVICUS at intergovernmental meetings in places like Geneva, New York and Washington DC. As the year went on, these “consultations” started to feel like “insultations” in which civil society was there just to tick a box.

Having read this year’s State of Civil Society Report, which documents a new wave of discontent around the world and some serious shortcomings in global governance, I fear that the world is wasting a lot of time, money and carbon without making a dent in the issues that matter most.

In this report, we argue that we need to redress a “double democratic deficit”. At the national level, growing numbers of people – including in countries that look democratic on paper and show excellent economic growth rates – are angry about a lack of voice, inequality, corruption and environmental destruction. This “second wave” of citizen uprisings – from Brazil to Turkey – is here to stay unless something is done to improve governance and accountability at the national level.

Meanwhile, in a world facing multiple crises, global governance is not working. Many of our international institutions and processes are out of date, unaccountable and unable to address present-day challenges effectively. This report shows that global governance remains remote and often disconnected from the people whose lives it impacts. There is an urgent need to democratise global governance, to support greater participation of citizens in decision-making and to engender an environment that enables civil society to substantively engage in these processes.

In addition to surveying the year that was for civil society and our thematic contributions on global governance, this report also includes a pilot study in which we have tried to design a Scorecard to evaluate how well intergovernmental organisations engage civil society. We hope that, with refinement, this Scorecard will become a useful tool for measuring how accountable and responsive these organisations are.

I would like to express my thanks to our colleagues from within the CIVICUS alliance who contributed pieces to this report, and to the small but very talented CIVICUS team that put the report together.

I look forward to working with our members and partners to usher in a new era of accountability in the international arena.

Dr Dhananjayan Sriskandarajah
Globally, there is a crisis in governance. This is playing out on the streets at national and local levels. Increasing numbers of people are protesting to express their frustration at the failure of power holders to act in the best interests of citizens.

Our State of Civil Society Report published in 2012 analysed the wave of public protest that was then sweeping many parts of the world, including the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Europe and North America. Our 2013 report, on the theme of the enabling environment for civil society, noted multiple deficiencies in the conditions for civil society and for the expression of public dissent, drawing attention to state pushback against protest, particularly in the MENA region. In the last 12 months, we have seen a second wave of mass protest, this time in new, often unexpected locations.

Recent protest hotspots have included Brazil, Turkey, Ukraine, Venezuela and several countries in South and Southeast Asia such as Bangladesh, Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand. Each of these mobilisations of dissent has had different local inspirations and varying trajectories of success, but they share some striking commonalities. These include the mushrooming of protest from an initially local grievance, such as a hike in transport fares or the proposed loss of a green space, to broader issues – of dissatisfaction with people’s lack of voice, the behaviour of political and economic elites, corruption and inequality. Often this growth of protest was inadvertently encouraged by a heavy-handed state response to largely peaceful dissent. Another commonality was in tactics, which saw substantial use of mobile technology and social media; creative, attention-grabbing techniques and viral memes; the nonviolent occupation of public space; and loose organisational structures with an absence of hierarchy and a commitment to participatory democracy.
These borrowed directly from the tactics of earlier protests and saw similar currents of international sharing and cross-border solidarity.

What recent protests tell us is that the anger that fuelled earlier protests is here to stay, because the issues remain salient. It is also significant that many recent protests have taken place in relatively mature, formal democracies and in countries that have made progress on economic indicators. Protests were not necessarily driven by the poorest and most marginalised people. This suggests that people want more than the formal right to participate in elections and want to see more than a growth in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). And they are making new channels for their demands. Protesters see established politics as not addressing the issues they care about. In doing so, they have identified a democratic deficit. Traditional party politics are therefore being rejected as being complicit in the status quo and inadequate in the opportunities they offer for voice; thus, new civic and political arenas are being formed.

It should also be noted that some of this anger and rejection of existing politics also takes extremist forms, while mainstream civil society organisations (CSOs) can face challenges in connecting with new protest movements and proving their relevance to these communities.

A BACKLASH AGAINST DISSENT

In the face of contemporary waves of protest, many governments feel threatened and have stepped up their efforts to close down civic space, through a combination of dubious legislation, the demonisation of protest movements and direct harassment of civil society activists and their organisations. In doing so, they have often times breached the letter and spirit of international law, further eroding public trust in the morality of the state whose response to crises is expected to be just and ethical.

The list of offenders is a long and egregious one. In most MENA countries, particularly Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Syria, the pushback has been strong and brutal, testing the hope generated by the peoples’ uprisings of 2011. Two other geographical regions show particular concentrations of heavy state action against civil society: the countries of the former Soviet Union and Sub-Saharan Africa. A further marked trend in the past 12 months has been backlash against lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) activism, seen in both these regions.

There is a tendency for repressive legislation to be borrowed and adapted from one country to another just as advocacy and protest tactics are being replicated by civil society. As discussed in the full report, a particular focus is on restricting the right of CSOs to receive funding from foreign sources, an essential means of support for CSOs working in politically difficult contexts. Other laws recently adopted in multiple contexts seek to proscribe what is considered permissible CSO activity, limit peaceful assembly and protest, and make CSO registration inordinately complex.

In more politically repressed contexts, the fact that new media has offered tools to find ways around censorship and the restriction of protest has made it a new target for government attacks. Meanwhile, individuals who blow the whistle on international surveillance tactics have been subject to malicious prosecution. The complicity of private sector interests in internet surveillance is a troubling part of this picture.
A rising area of concern for civil society is the role of the private sector in governance. Part of the dissatisfaction being expressed through protest is with the lack of public control over large corporations, as well as the tight overlap and collusion between economic and political elites. Sometimes these are hard to distinguish: politicians may have extensive business interests, while the economically powerful may move into politics as a way of protecting their wealth. Political decisions are taken that benefit economic elite interests. Compared to their own lack of voice, protesters see that private sector interests enjoy privileged access to decision-makers. They see states abdicating their responsibilities by outsourcing basic services and selling elements of the public sphere to private interests, diluting accountability as a consequence. Further, large transnational corporations transcend the regulation attempts of national jurisdictions. Many of the worst acts of repression against civil society are against activists seeking environmental justice and protection of land rights, who position themselves in opposition to powerful construction, agribusiness and extractive industries.

One hope we might hold out for the institutions of global governance is that they can offer a source of protection and support for people who are being repressed, marginalised or excluded at the national level. If democratic deficits at the national level arise partly out of the experience of economic globalisation, which hands power to unaccountable corpora-
tions, then it should be logical that global opportunities also exist to redress this. In an ever more complex governance environment, where large problems are acknowledged to cross national borders, the international level of decision-making is starting to matter more. Global institutions need to be more attuned to this reality.

And to some extent, international governance institutions play a positive role: the UN Human Rights Council and regional human rights bodies, such as those in Africa and the Americas, are valued by civil society as arenas in which important issues of civil society rights can be raised and international support can be won, despite the areas where civil society feels their processes could be improved. The UN has helped propagate global norms that can then be applied to, and become the focus for, civil society advocacy at the national level. International connections offer an important source of solidarity and support for civil society activists who are under threat.

However, a number of powerful, connected civil society critiques about the institutions of global and regional governance are being made. The international governance system is complex and characterised by gaps; for example, it is strong on enforcing trade agreements, but weak on enforcing environmental agreements. Many of these institutions have not kept up with dramatic geopolitical changes in recent decades that have seen the rise of new powers from the global South, the expansion of civil society and changing citizens’ expectations of participation. They are out of date, reflecting a post-Second World War order that has long passed in reality, but which prevails in the control of key political and financial institutions, notably the UN Security Council, the IMF and the World Bank. These remain skewed towards the interests of a handful of states that have in effect been able to lock in the power imbalances that they enjoy.

They have been able to do this because international institutions do not have a high level of autonomy from the most powerful states; these governments pay the bills and their representatives sit in the key decision-making structures. This means that national interests too often prevail and that international institutions provide a battleground in which the strategic imperatives of states are asserted and contested. The failure of the international community to mount a coherent response to end the suffering of civilians in the Syrian conflict is the current clearest indictment of an international order that was supposedly established to transcend the inability of states to act in the best interests of humanity. Instead, the system has become deadlocked, captured by vested geopolitical interests.

It is for this reason that suggestions that the international order can be reformed by redressing power imbalances between states in the governance of international institutions – for example, by bringing more states into the UN Security Council – are inadequate. The challenge that international institutions are deformed by state interests will not necessarily be addressed by involving more states, which will carry their vested interests in with them.

A further civil society concern is that large transnational corporations are seeing the development arena as an opportunity for profit. International financial institutions are promoting public-private partnerships, at international and national levels, and also pushing market liberalisation onto economically fragile countries as a condition of support, which has the effect of increasing access for large corporations, Eduardo Fonseca Arraes
corporations to activities previously carried out by governments. At the global level, private sector involvement is often justified by the argument that it makes international governance more efficient and flexible. Many international organisations, not least to address the funding gap between their aspirations and their resources, are targeting private sector support and are encouraged by states to do so. But this does not come without a cost: the privatised sphere generally has less scope for accountability than the public sphere; it also excludes those who cannot afford to pay for services, further exacerbating inequality. Moreover, private involvement in the implementation of state responsibilities often bleeds into influence on policy, favouring elite over majority interests.

Comparatively, CSOs and citizens have far less access and influence. In global governance, there is insufficient opportunity for voices that rise above the interests of national governments and the private sector to prevail. CIVICUS’ Scorecard exercise to assess civil society engagement with international organisations reveals considerable discontent with the way international governance institutions engage with civil society. Consultations with civil society are assessed to be largely superficial, often appearing to be box-ticking exercises. Many CSOs feel that, while they are asked to help implement programmes, they are not given sufficient scope to shape policy. It is often hard to show real influence having resulted from international institutions’ engagement with civil society. The member states of international bodies are often able to override input from CSOs. The terms of engagement are determined by international institutions and states, and CSOs are excluded from the key decision-making arenas. CSOs also assess that international institutions are too selective in choosing who they engage with and need to improve their outreach to be exposed to a wider, more diverse range of civil society.

At the same time, CSOs themselves come into criticism for sometimes acting as gatekeepers. Larger and better resourced CSOs that have traditionally enjoyed privileged access to international institutions are often blamed for being preoccupied with retaining their status rather than broadening civil society participation. This includes a tendency for CSOs based in the global North, where the overwhelming majority of international institutions are based, to have the most voice. Civil society is also criticised for being parochial and focussing on individual issues, rather than working together, and for failing to put forward implementable solutions. There remains a glaring lack of global, mass-based, citizen-led movements in international decision-making arenas that can offer counter-balances to an international order based around the interests of states and large corporations.

International governance currently offers a double democratic deficit: large numbers of people are dissatisfied with the subversion of democracy by elites at the national level, and an international governance system that is accessible to a select few offers little possibility to address citizens’ concerns. The current arrangements of international governance are not open and transparent. International institutions remain mysterious to citizens and fail to engage directly with them. When they act, they are not seen to be responsive to the expectations of voice and participation that people are demanding on the streets in different parts of the world.

Just as states that go through the formal motions of democracy without addressing inequality and marginalisation in society have fallen into discredit, international governance institutions with limited scope for people’s participation risk becoming irrelevant. The challenge for international institutions is that they are seen to be doing little to foster positive change about the issues that people are expressing their anger about – the widening gap between the
top and bottom echelons of society, lack of voice and subversion of democracy, elite power – or worse, that in promoting market-oriented policies, they can be identified as contributing to these problems.

The current system that privileges states and corporations over people is unacceptable. The key test of meaningful global governance reform would therefore be whether opportunities for access by, and accountability towards, a wide range of citizens and their associations are assured.

As the world debates a post-2015 sustainable development agenda, it is critical that national governments and international institutions inspire actions that empower the marginalised and collectively address the challenge posed by economic and political systems that concentrate power and prosperity in the hands of a few.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

*Recommendations for governments and intergovernmental organisations:*

There is a need to move away from the state-centric model of international governance towards a citizen-oriented model. Radical new forms of representation and oversight, such as citizens’ panels and assemblies that have real power, should be explored. Current institutions should be audited and tested on their ability to respond to and achieve progress on issues identified by people rather than just governments.

International governance institutions need to make their decision-making processes more open and democratic. This needs to be done on two levels. It should include the promotion of equality between states and the removal of arbitrary veto powers that some states hold. Additionally, it should also include efforts to create greater parity between official and civil society delegations and more opportunities for civil society to give input and exercise accountability. As part of this, attempts to involve civil society should actively broaden the involvement of various segments within the sector, and address imbalances in access between Northern and Southern civil society actors.

Information on the work and mandates of international governance institutions should proactively be made available to enable greater civil society involvement and scrutiny of decisions and their implementation. New media, including mobile and social media, should also be used to help demystify international institutions, and to encourage participation and the exercise of social accountability. In addition, there should be regular interactions by the leadership of intergovernmental organisations with civil society and the media, as well as the creation of accessible databases of statistical and other information on their work.
In order to strengthen civil society participation, greater local outreach should be offered and dedicated spaces for civil society participation should be established, with civil society helping to define and govern these. Additionally, funds should be earmarked to enable broad civil society participation, and accreditation procedures should be simplified.

International organisations should prioritise making the environment for civil society more enabling – at the local, national, regional and global levels – in law and in practice. Efforts should be made from the local to the global levels to ensure practical realisation of civil society rights enshrined in various international treaties and agreements.

**Recommendations for civil society:**

CSOs that are concerned with issues of social justice and civic change should make the influencing of global governance institutions a programmatic priority. This necessitates enhancing civil society’s knowledge and understanding of the impact of global decision-making on their local conditions, including through information sharing and peer learning. Additionally, the creation of linkages with new protest movements – and building of coalitions and networks that enable the sharing of resources and the connection of diverse parts of civil society, particularly South-North and national-local connections – should be prioritised.

The larger, better resourced CSOs that have an established presence in key intergovernmental organisations should take the initiative to democratise the space they hold and involve a wider range of civil society groups in engaging international governance institutions, including by sharing their organisational accreditation and financial resources.

Strategic relationships should be forged with states that are more sympathetic towards global governance reform. Relations also need to be built with academia and the media to ensure that civil society advocacy is grounded in expert analysis and wins wide public support. Strengthening these relationships will ensure that the role of international organisations, the challenges of private sector privilege and the centrality of global governance reform to the issues that people are concerned about can be made more clear, and tangible paths for engagement and influence can be identified.

CIVICUS commits itself to working with its members and partners to implement the above recommendations. In the coming weeks and months, we will redouble our efforts to build more lateral relationships within civil society and create pathways for greater citizen involvement in and the monitoring of global governance processes.
CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society around the world. Founded in 1993, CIVICUS proudly promotes voices from the Global South and has members in more than 120 countries throughout the world.

We warmly welcome new members and partners. To join us or find out more please visit www.civicus.org.